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Mr. Block's Past and Legacy

(with Sean Carleton and Iain McIntyre)



The Final Straw Radio - November 5, 2023

This week, Ian talks to Sean Carleton of Graphic History Collective and Labor historian and activist Iain McIntyre about the recent release of *Mr. Block: The Subversive Comics and Writings of Ernest Riebe* by PM Press. After some background on their respective projects, they talk about the legacy of the IWW cartoonist, the origins and process of putting the book together, and what aspects of his work are still relevant today. Here's a hint: just about all of them are.

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TFSR: Thank you for taking the time to talk to me. Would you mind introducing yourself and telling us your preferred pronouns, associations, or anything else that might be relevant to our conversation today?

Sean: Sure. Hi, folks, my name is Sean Carleton, I use he/him pronouns, and I'm a historian at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, Treaty One territory. My research looks at the history of colonialism and capitalism and schooling in Canada. I'm also interested in labor and social movement activism as well. I'm a co-founder of the Graphic History Collective, which has produced a number of different graphic labor histories and books like the Mr. Block one that we're going to be talking about today.

Iain: Hi, I am Iain McIntyre, he/him. I am from Melbourne/Naarm in Australia, and I'm speaking on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people. I'm a historian with a background in community radio, and I've been involved with various social and labor movements over the years. I'm currently working on a research project funded through the [Gerda Henkel Foundation about direct action democracy. I'm also part of the commonslibrary.org team, which produces a website with more than 1,000 resources for campaigners, activist, and movements. It has a focus on guides, how-tos, case studies, and creative activism of the kind we're going to be talking about today.

TFSR: Thank you. Just as a brief background, can you speak to the origins of the Graphic History Collective, maybe talk about what the initial mission was, and how it has transformed over the years of its existence?

S: Sure. In the early 2000s, with the rising popularity of comics or graphic novels that perhaps some of your listeners will be familiar with—things like *Persepolis*, the *Wobblies!*, which came out in about 2005—a number of Canadian labor historians applied for a grant to do some more research about the history of International Workers' Day, Mayday, on May 1st as it was observed and celebrated in Canada. Part of that work was thinking of a popular and accessible way of sharing or disseminating that history. What they wanted to do was make a comic book version of their results. The only thing was that none of the historians on that original grant knew how to make a comic book, so they had to bring together a number of different researchers, writers, activists, and illustrators to collaborate on the project and make it happen. I was fortunately one of those historians brought into the work alongside Mark Leier, Robin Folvik, who

about making fun of the blockheads among us, but also there's an element of self-critique in the character of Block, that a lot of Wobblies may have fallen prey to some of the misbeliefs that Mr. Block believed in, that it was through maybe loyalty to the boss or bureaucrat that you were going to get rewarded, that your loyalty shouldn't be with your fellow workers. Riebe's character is critiquing Blocks externally but also challenging the ways that capitalist mythology gets internalized and holds workers back from not being radical, of not wanting to be courageous and engaging in a variety of different actions outside of the more safe channels such as voting, etc. So Mr. Block actually is doing both. The illustration is bringing new people into the IWW, but the character and laughing, lampooning this blockhead character was a way, as Iain was saying, of, yes, it was preaching to the choir, but it was also trying to ensure that that choir was on tune. That's an interesting way of thinking about Mr. Block as a character and why it continues to be so relevant. Blockism is still very much with us today. If Riebe was drawing new Mr. Block strips today, Mr. Block'd be wearing a MAGA hat and cheering on Bezos to the moon while accepting the pizza lunch from the boss at the anti-union meeting. So readers today will resonate with a lot of what Riebe was trying to critique in the 1910s and 20s. A lot has changed in the last 100 years, but in terms of how capitalism operates and serves to oppress the working class, there sadly is not a lot of fundamental change in the relationship between employer and employee.

The other point of your question there, Ian, was also about the state of progressive comics today. I'll give you a couple of examples. Sure, absolutely, Sam Wallman needs a shout-out, their book is called *Our Members Be Unlimited*. It's a global approach to graphic labor history and labor recording. Really a fascinating work. The folks at World War 3 comics based out of New York also should get a shout-out. In fact, we launched Mr. Block in a number of US cities in the spring and early summer, and we were in New Jersey, we were in Chicago. But we collaborated with a lot of great folks in Brooklyn, NY, who are connected in some form or fashion with World War 3 comics, Anabelle Heckler, Sabrina Jones, and Seth Tobocman. Seth and Sabrina contributed to that original 2005 Wobblies collection and have continued to be part of this growing scene of graphic labor and radical histories, people's histories in comic book form. Since I started this work in the mid-2000s, we've seen a lot of people get involved with graphic history in Canada. I should give a shout-out to fellow GHC members Robin Folvik, Kara Sievewright, Orion Keresztesi, Gord Hill, and all sorts of wonderful people whom we've been able to connect with, Althea Balmes, Jo SiMalaya Alcampo. We've just been able to collaborate with so many incredible

TF SR: Thank you very much. So my last question is a kind of a long one. What do you make of the state of progressive and radical comics today? Would you say there are enough artists working in this vein to constitute a scene? I guess as a final question, when it comes to comics in the vein of Mr. Block, which could safely be described as agitprop, do you think it's more important to uphold or strengthen the beliefs of the audience that it has or that it gets, or do you think it's more important to bring new people into the conversation?

I: With any kind of, as you said, agitprop part of activism, ideally, you can do both of the things you mentioned. People often talk about preaching to the choir, and I can't remember who I've pinched this from, but it's important to help the choir stay in tune. Part of a work of movements and what creates movement, and one of the things that has made the IWW quite dynamic, particularly in the period when Riebe was working, is a really healthy internal culture. So having shared values, shared humor, entertaining yourselves, communicating with yourselves is really important. But obviously, that can disappear up its own backside. So you have to be reaching out and so forth. Riebe's work works in both respects. In terms of the healthiness of radical comics, there are lots of people doing great work. Paul Buhle, who wrote the preface to the book, has now collaborated on many projects with different artists, telling histories. I wanted to give a bit of a shout-out to an Australian artist Sam Wallman, who's really pushed radical comics here in recent years. He's part of a collective of artists who work in all sorts of forms but with a focus based in the trades hall here in Melbourne, which is the peak body for the unions. Sam produced a book last year called *Our Members Be Unlimited*, which is a global and local history of unionism. But it also combines one of the great things about comics: comics journalism. So he follows and illustrates his experiences working at Amazon and the various exploitation and horrors connected with that. And then goes from there to provide a more global history. So yeah, there are definitely people doing really fantastic work still.

S: Yeah, to build a little bit more on what Iain was saying in relationship to your question, I think that Mr. Block was an attempt to bring new members into the IWW through the use of a new medium, including comics and illustrations. The editor of the *Industrial Worker*, Walker C. Smith, saw the potential of including graphics on the back page of the newspaper as a way of bringing people in. But it was also, as Iain was saying, Mr. Block functions in two ways: Yes, it's

were researching and writing for the project and then working with illustrators such as Sam Bradd and Trevor Mckilligan. Together, it was around 2008, we all completed different components of the research and the project and collaborated to bring them all together to produce our first book project, which was called *Mayday: A Graphic History of Protest*, which was eventually published by Between The Lines Press in 2012. The Graphic History Collective, from its origins in 2008-2009, has been around for more than 10 years. We've produced a number of different projects since that time that we're quite proud of and that have put us in contact with a number of really cool people around the world, including Iain, to collaborate and really share the lessons of labor history and the workers' movement to revitalize our struggles for a better world.

TF SR: Thank you. I was looking at the Graphic History Collective website and the participants. It's a very lengthy list of multidisciplinary contributors. By way of understanding how Graphic History Collective works, has Graphic History Collective functioned more as a hub for people doing this work or providing a central platform? Are the contributors talking to each other much?

S: Good question. I'll speak briefly and then maybe let Iain weigh in a little bit on what it was to work with us. Are we a hub? Are we a network? We act as both. We're all activists, and we bring that mentality to the work that we do, I think of our primary role is really about skill sharing, boosting up emerging artists, and figuring out how to collaborate with awesome radical historians around the world to bring these important lessons to people that need them as they struggle in their daily life. This idea of "from each according to their ability to each according to their need" is a core part of our emphasis on solidarity and collaboration. That's how we like to work. But then we also use our website as a way for people both to connect with us and for us to connect with other people. Sometimes we simply profile work by folks who are struggling to get attention. So we played both a role as a network of artists, a hub for this stuff, as well as trying to make those different connections, which is how we got connected with Iain. We can get into the history of how Mr. Block happened. We get connected with so many people around the world. For me, at least, the best part of doing this work is meeting inspiring, awesome people who are helping the work along, people such as Iain.

I: My involvement in this project, I guess, came about when I'd already been

researching stuff about Ernest Riebe for some time and had collected a lot of his work and was looking at doing a collection of his work with PM Press, who are publisher I've worked with for the last 10 or 12 years. Then the Graphic History Collective had been doing stuff in parallel, and their publisher Between The Lines got in touch with PM, and that's how the connection came about. It just made sense not to duplicate work and to work together. I was already familiar with some of the group's work through the 1919 book about the Winnipeg general strike and some other bits and pieces. So it was great to find other people who were really enthusiastic about Riebe's work, and obviously, his time had come or something.

TFSR: Before we get into the specifics of the book, maybe a more broad general question: What is it that you think makes the medium of comics uniquely useful when it comes to elucidating people's histories?

S: One of the reasons why I thought Iain would be great at this is I know that he's looked at some of Ernest Riebe's other work in terms of his political cartooning. I'll let Iain expand on that a little bit, but illustration has always been a key part of the labor movement, the workers' movement, reflecting a reality. Whether it's before photographs became an easy way to capture movements, often folks would illustrate protests and different things. But if we're fast forwarding, say, 100 years and looking at in the 21st century why comics might be particularly useful when it comes to promoting people's histories... I hope this isn't too nerdy of an answer, but if you think about the way that the medium of comics work, as opposed to other mediums like TV or film, which are much more passive—you turn on the TV, and the messaging washes over you, whether you're in the room or not—comics are different. You as the reader of a comic need to interpret the different fragments of information, you have to piece them together across what is known as the gutter, or the different boxes, the white pieces in between panels. So the reader has to be an active part of the storytelling process to make meaning of what they are seeing. If we connect this back to a more radical understanding of education, there is liberatory potential there in terms of consciousness-raising, of getting people engaged and doing something. So comics and graphic novels, because it is a much more active mediums, rather than a passive medium, it's particularly helpful in the medium is the message. People's history in the form of comics allows that more active, engaged process that hopefully readers can then put into practice when they put down our books. So that's at least how I've come over the years to think of

that. And, if you want me to explain a little bit, in the 1919 pamphlet that Riebe published called Mr. Block and the Profiteers, which really is one of his most extended character profiles of Mr. Block. It's not a six- or eight-panel strip. It's a larger pamphlet with accompanying illustrations that really needed to be seen by more people to really understand where Riebe was at with the Mr. Block character development. This is after his initial burst of creativity from 1912 to 1914. He then disappears for a while and then re-emerges in the postwar period with some more Mr. Block material. This pamphlet is fascinating for a variety of reasons. But one of the things that he talks about in the pamphlet is also how Mr. Block and blocks like him fall prey to racism, which only benefits the boss, allows employers to divide the working class, and increases exploitation. So he's aware of that.

He has this strange thing at the end of the pamphlet, where once he's done, he includes a small section on Mr. Block in history that goes on a strange tangent of putting him back in ancient China. While the section itself does not perpetuate anti-Chinese racism, one of the accompanying cartoons draws on prevalent stereotypes that we thought were inappropriate. So we had a conversation about what we do about this. In some ways, that part of the pamphlet is not very helpful. It's not very relevant. So we thought that by excising it, it wouldn't detract from an understanding of what Riebe was trying to do in that pamphlet. Then the other part was drawing on the old IWW tradition of changing material, of changing lyrics, of updating them for present-day purposes. We thought, if we acknowledged that this exists, people can look it up. It's there. But we didn't feel it added overall to sharp criticism of how Blockism works. So we thought that by acknowledging it, but not including that particular cartoon and small section, we weren't hiding anything. We weren't trying to make Riebe appear better than he was. It was that we wanted readers to enjoy the process of reading this book and really focus on the main contribution of what Riebe is putting forward is that Blockism, unfortunately, is as relevant in the 21st century as it was in the 1910s and 20s. That was a creative decision that we felt a) we had to explain to readers, but b) that we thought was in keeping with the way that Wobbly cultural work often goes, which is... Our goal is to talk to workers today. Our commitments, and I know this as a historian, my activism and the role of the historian can collide there. But the goal wasn't to preserve, the goal was to push a critique of Blockism into the present and allow people today to laugh at the silly things that some workers believed in the 1910s and 20s and see that reflected in their daily reality. We thought that including needlessly a political cartoon potentially interpreted as a racist didn't serve that interest.

comics became “Why don’t we try to find as much Mr. Block stuff as possible and perhaps pair it with some of the reception,” the Joe Hill song, other people that have written about Block, and of course that Thorkelson comic from Wobblies that I mentioned got me interested in Block in the first place. So when I went back then to the press, they had said, “Okay, we checked in with PM, they’re interested, but there’s this other person who’s also doing this Mr. Block research and has a whole bunch of other material. Perhaps, rather than putting out two books, we could combine forces and put out one book that would be as comprehensive as possible.”

I remember having a conversation with Iain early on about whether he thought this would be worthwhile. To pick up on what Iain was saying there, he was referencing that a lot of the amazing research that he’s done to create a more full and robust understanding of Riebe’s Mr. Block creations, that a lot of them were in poor shape. So what do you do with that? One of the benefits of working with Between The Lines is that they have an incredible designer named Devin Clancy, who felt that he could take some of these very raw and rough pictures, scans, different things and find a way to put them all in one book. Clancy worked with another artist, Caleb Mitchell, and they did a lot of beautiful work to digitally enhance and touch up and really make this anthology possible by taking the work that we had done, combining it with the work that Iain had done, and presenting it in one beautiful collection, where... I don’t think that we found everything that Riebe created. I don’t know what Iain feels. I feel there’s got to be other stuff out there that we don’t know about, but this is the most comprehensive collection of Riebe’s Mr. Block work to be published to date, and the emphasis on trying to reproduce it in the best way possible, of making it readable, on the design front, a lot of credit needs to go to BTL and Gavin Clancy and Caleb Mitchell in particular of really giving Mr. Block a facelift for the 21st century so that people can really connect to Riebe’s incredible work that he’s left behind.

TFSR: In putting together this book, *Mr. Block: The Subversive Comics and Writings of Ernest Riebe*, you contextualized the material with supplementary materials. I was particularly interested to read that some material was deemed racially insensitive and was omitted from the collection. Do I have that correct?

S: Yes. That was a decision by the Graphic History Collective. Iain doesn’t have to take any responsibility for that, but yes, we did make a creative decision on

why comics. That is one possibility in terms of how they work. They can really get people engaged, rather than just passively accepting or reading particular material.

I: Yeah, and of course, having the images engages a different part of your brain and draws in a potentially different audience than, say, a book that’s very text-heavy, no illustrations and stuff. So the IWW cartoons formed part of the IWW’s overall political project. They were recasting all sorts of cultural forms from capitalism. Cartoons were usually used to advertise products and reinforce the dominant economic and social practices. So instead the IWW, through their newspapers and leaflets, posters, but also stickers (because they helped pioneer the use of stickers in political activity), they framed a very different set of values through using a combination of illustration and text. So, as cartoons and comics are generally more memorable and arresting than text, and radical cartoons, like other cartoons, can be a condensed, attention-grabbing, and fun form of getting over a message, in the case of the IWW rabble-rousing.

I’d see comics and cartoons in the Wobbly press playing three broad roles: they express grievances, highlight problems, and challenge the dominant ideas about how the world worked, and how it got to be the way it was. But Wobbly cartoons very much also illustrated the struggle between workers and capitalism. They were also used to give a utopia or a vision of what the future could be like. So they distilled concepts regarding class and struggle and so forth into this simple and easily digestible form. But really importantly, cartoons also lifted people’s spirits and provided them with laughs and fostered a sense of solidarity and collective identity. Humor and irreverence were very much a key part of the IWW’s culture from the beginning. So the nature of cartoons made them an obvious art form. One other quick thing I’ll just mention is that many Wobblies’ first language wasn’t English. Many Wobblies didn’t necessarily have high literacy, depending on their background and so forth. So comics were a way of getting messages across to people who didn’t necessarily have the language skills in English to tackle or make a huge essay or really theoretical piece. There are stories of some Wobblies learning English almost via cartoons, matching the text to the image. So on lots of levels, the use of cartoons and comics was a really effective way of getting messages out. The sheer volume of the hundreds of different artists provided work for the IWW. So it was not just a popular form in terms of the membership rating it, but it was also a very popular form in terms of the membership creating them.

S: Yeah, and we need to remember also that many of these famous Wobbly content creators were immigrants, often non-English speakers, people like Ernest Riebe, but also Joe Hill. So finding ways to get your message out in easier ways was really important. I was just thinking, Iain, as you were speaking of that Joe Hill quote, where he says, “A pamphlet, no matter how good is never read more than once” or something, “but a song is learned from heart and repeated over and over again.” If we were to change his focus from music to comics, it’s something like, a comic can be laughed at, it can make you feel different things. It can convey important messages in an easy way that can appeal to a broad swath of workers who might not want to sit down at the end of the night and read a 2000-word treatise on something. But to laugh at Mr. Block or other issues within the union, it was popular and it was a way to attract that attention and get workers thinking about the issues that these artists obviously wanted to put in front of folks.

TFSR: I had seen Mr. Block intermittently over years without ever really knowing, without making that connection to the origins and the historical aspect of it. Can you talk to me about how familiar each of you was with these cartoons before you set about constructing this project and what your initial impressions of these cartoons and, in general, the work of Ernest Riebe were?

I: Yeah, I guess the first place I came across Block’s work was the Charles H. Kerr reprint from 1984 of the Mr. Block collection, which had originally been put together in 1913. So that got reprinted in the 80s. So I can’t remember if it was the late 80s or early 90s that I would have seen that. I was already a comics fan, so the fact that there were these quite funny and entertaining comics from 70-80-90 years back? Anyway... from the beginning of the 20th century. It was really impressive. Then there were also some pieces reprinted in the Rebel Voices anthology, which was from the 60s and was thereafter reprinted a few times. I’d also heard the Joe Hill song. So yeah, I was familiar with the character, but as perhaps we’ll get into later, I didn’t realize the extent of Riebe’s work till much later.

S: For me, it was through two sources. The first is song. So I became involved in the IWW, and I started learning more about its history and its culture. I first came across Mr. Block through the Little Red Songbook and Joe Hill’s song and learned that. As well in around 2006, I read the graphic novel Wobblies!, just as I was getting interested in labor history and labor activism. Nick Thorkelson

that collection, and it was really lovely to turn the actual pages and see these cartoons not on a screen or not on microfilm, but the original newspapers were not printed on archival quality paper. So a lot of them were literally crumbling. I wasn’t given permission to scan them because they probably would have completely fallen apart had we done that. So they had to be photographed. Using the Douglas Heller thesis, and using various other kinds of clues, I also got a lot of invaluable help from Michigan’s Labadie Collection, and Julie Herrada helped out. But unfortunately, their collection as well, the original newspapers are also falling apart there. So again, they had to be photographed, which meant the quality of the images that I was able to capture was not necessarily that great. Sean could talk about the materials that he gathered and then all the work they had to do to get these up to scratch.

S: To add on to that, it was funny that the Graphic History Collective and Iain were working on Mr. Block research without knowing each other. It just so happened that Between The Lines Press collaborates with PM Press to push out a lot of their titles in the US. They had collaborated previously to rerelease the Joe Hill collection that Charles Kerr House had put out. So they knew each other a little bit, and they had some experience in jointly publishing Wobbly history and reviving it. And because I knew that when I approached Between The Lines and I had said... At the time, Charles H. Kerr had gone under. It’s since been revived, but at the time it had gone under, and that meant that a lot of their Wobbly histories, including the 1984 reprint of Mr. Block was no longer in publication. So I approached them and said—his was around the election of Trump and there was a lot of hand-wringing about the role of the working class and the silly things that many in the working class believe in—that perhaps a revival of the Mr. Block strip would be warranted. So I started to do more research and thinking, “Okay, do we just want to republish the 24 comics that were reprinted in the 1984 reprint of the 1912 original pamphlet?” At the same time, as we were looking into this through a number of IWW contacts, I got linked up with someone who I know from Wobbly organizing out in Vancouver, or in BC, named DJ Alperovitz, and he was running an IWW digital archive. He was basically just trying to collect all the different pieces of Wobbly history and make them accessible to Wobblies. So when I mentioned that we were thinking about doing this reprint, he said, “There’s a lot more Mr. Block stuff than just that ‘84 reprint. I came across a pamphlet that Riebe had done in 1919 called Mr. Block and the Profiteers. As well, there was a play, Mr. Block: The Silent Majority, a one-act play. So then the idea of just reprinting the 24

pers because the IWW popularized the idea and the term of direct action in the US. The term direct action had been used elsewhere, but the IWW made it popular in the US. So, basically, in the process of going through a whole lot of microfilms, I started—and this wasn't just the case with Riebe, it was with a whole lot of IWW cartoons, but also a whole lot of other IWW writing—realizing there was all this stuff that had been touched upon or talked about in academic and other articles, but the originals hadn't been documented. I started this process as I was going through these old newspapers, putting out any cartoons that I thought were really good, then I, because of just the quality of Riebe's work, I particularly began focusing on him, although we'll be doing another anthology of IWW cuttings in general.

But yes, it's very hard to find complete collections of IWW materials. It's for a few reasons. As with a lot of other newspapers and magazines in general, the publications were ephemeral, they weren't created with posterity in mind. Raids on all the IWW offices during a government crackdown on the union in 1917 meant that the IWW lost all kinds of records, and original artworks and other materials were stolen by the authorities and subsequently destroyed or locked up in ways that we still can't access. So there doesn't appear to be a central repository with everything or most of things. So there are just lots of partial collections around the world. Now, microfilm copies of the *Industrial Worker Solidarity*, *Industrial Solidarity*, and the various names of the main IWW East and West Coast mastheads were made in the 60s and 70s from a New York collection. So I started working with those. I'd also seen some of those in original newspapers at the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam in the 2000s. I was able to get a hold of some of these microfilms through the university library of one of the universities I work with, but we couldn't find libraries that had supply holdings for certain years. And a lot of the microfilms (I'm sure Sean can talk about this in a minute), they weren't scanned or shot very well. Or they were scanned and shot with a focus on having high-contrast text. That didn't serve cartoons very well because often they're being shot in really high contrast they lost whole sections of the comics. But also some of the original issues of the newspapers, as you can see in the Mr. Block anthology were torn and ripped. And I wasn't able to find other libraries that had any copies of those.

I subsequently discovered the State Library of New South Wales had subscribed to some US IWW newspapers. Presumably, this was because the IWW had an Australian branch, which had some impact in the 1910s, but I'm not really sure how it came about. So I was able to access more newspapers from

actually has a two-page strip in that collection on the history of the Wobblies that looks not only at Mr. Block as a character but Ernest Riebe. That was the first time that I had pieced together the Mr. Block from the song to Mr. Block as an illustrated character and realized that Joe Hill actually didn't come up with the character, or at least we don't think he did. We think that Hill was referencing Ernest Riebe's illustrated work. So those were my first two introductions to Riebe, and then I became familiar with the Charles Kerr republication of a 1912 pamphlet that the IWW put out a collection of Riebe's strips. But maybe that's jumping too far ahead. We can talk about all of that in a second.

TFSR: Okay, thank you. Can you say a little bit about Riebe's life and his career as a cartoonist? Can you speak to whether his cartoons were uniquely radical for the time in which they were initially published? Can you speak to the reach of his cartoons? Would they have been seen outside of IWW spaces, for instance?

S: Sure, I can take the first part and Iain can take the second part. What do we know about Riebe and his life? Unfortunately, the answer is not a lot. Though part of publishing this book is hopefully more information about Riebe can come out. People will know more about him and be interested in his life. What we do have is available to us mostly in speculative form, pieced together through different fragments that were left behind from his life. This lack of personal information is actually quite common for many of the Wobbly artists and organizers of the early 20th century. But what we do know is that it's believed that Riebe was born in Dresden, Germany possibly in the 1880s or 1890s, given that the Wobblies tended to be comprised of many young men. So thinking he's writing in the 1910s and 20s, so he's probably not more than 30 or 40 years old, making the date of his birth likely around the 80s or 90s. Then he moves, of course, to the United States. There's a historian Douglas M. Heller—I want to give him a good shout-out, one of the few scholars who've actually written about Riebe. He surmises that Riebe was likely an itinerant laborer, as many Wobblies were. He was possibly based out of Minneapolis or somewhere out in Washington State in the Pacific Northwest. It is unclear what happened to him during the First World War, which perhaps we can talk about. He then re-emerges, at least in written and illustrated... his work reappears. He goes off to China, and then the trail goes cold. Nevertheless, though, there are a few personal details about Riebe. We do know that he was obviously gifted with sharp wit and artistic skill based on what he's left behind. He signed many of

his works. It appears that he published under his own name, instead of using a codename, like Bingo, which was Ralph Chaplin, for example. He contributed numerous illustrations and writings to the union's newspapers, not just about Mr. Block, which maybe Iain can expand on. But in over just a decade, Riebe produced a treasure trove of agitational art, and most famous are undoubtedly the comics and writings that that he left to Mr. Block. But I'll leave it to Iain to explain a little bit their radical possibility.

I: Yeah, I'll just add a bit biographically. Various people have done research. And one person thought they'd figured out when he died, but then new cartoons came out after that date. As Sean mentioned, it wasn't unusual for there to be very little information about activists at this time. There was an Ernest Riebe in the Minneapolis phonebook or directory around the time that he was publishing work there. But again, various Wobbly members and activists would adopt new names, as some immigrants would when they moved to the US. So we haven't been able to find a record of this particular Ernest Riebe coming to the US, which may be because there are missing records, or it may be because he changed his name. We don't know. He may have changed his name later. So it can make it very complicated, particularly when they don't have much of a public life other than their work. Looking at his cartoons, as Doug Heller noted, they show familiarity with the life of migrant workers and the work that we're doing on the harvests and in the timber industry. So, if Riebe was doing that work, then he really sat squarely within two of the IWW's key demographics because both hobos and immigrants made up a big chunk of its membership.

His first work appeared in the *Industrial Worker* in October 1912. It was a cartoon rather than a strip. During his active period, he produced dozens of cartoons along with Mr. Block pieces. So I've been able to locate 114 separate pieces by Riebe. I found mention of a single cartoon he did for a socialist organization, but no copies of that organization's newspapers seem to still exist. Otherwise, there was a reprint of the initial cartoon where he announced the coming of Mr. Block, and that was reprinted in the *International Socialist Review*, which was a broader left newspaper but closely associated with the IWW. But beyond that, all of his work appears to have been originally published or published in Wobbly publications. As Sean mentioned, his work came and went, he mostly appeared in 1912-1914, and he returned in 1919 and produced some pamphlets. Then he comes and goes during the 20s. And like monikers and not knowing much about people's pasts, these disappearances were also typical among contributors to the Wobbly press because they weren't paid for

the work that they did for the IWW. They were always volunteer activists. So he had to make a living. They were generally most of the riders for the Wobblies, most of the membership were working-class people, often doing the worst jobs, subjected to harassment from authorities and all that health and other problems that come from that. So we know from the life stories of other writers and members that some will drop out for periods or permanently due to crack-downs by local and federal authorities. There'd be ruptures within the union, and there'd be arguments with editors. Riebe's last work appears in 1924. That was the year that the IWW suffered a devastating split. One could speculate, that he dropped out at that time, as a lot of the membership did, but it could be for other reasons. I feel that Riebe's work distilled a sense of humor that was already present amongst the IWW, and it drew on hobo traditions. Therefore hobos and the IWW would have been his main audience. Wobbly newspapers at this time had a readership in the tens of thousands. They crossed over with broader audiences on the left. I imagine his work would have gotten around that milieu. And the IWW in the time—early 10s through to the mid-20s, but particularly in the 10s—the organization really captured the radical zeitgeist of the time and was very much on the leading edge. I imagine his work would have been read beyond just the union. Having said that, I'm not aware of it being quoted in mainstream press. So it would have been still within that radical view.

TFSR: So how scattered to the wind are these comics? Can you talk about the process of compiling the materials that were here and the process of restoring them and any challenges that arose there?

I: I might take the first part, and then do you want to talk about the restoration, Sean?

S: Sounds good. Look at us, we are showing that unionism works. We are a partnership. Go for it.

I: I first got involved with collecting Riebe's work... As I said, I read the stuff that had been reprinted in the 60s-70s-80s. Then as part of this direct action and democracy project, the roots of that were partially me doing some research with another Australian historian, Sean Scalmer. In the process of tracking the emergence of the concept of direct action and the way it was practiced, how it was theorized and what it meant, one of the jobs that I had, in the early stages of what has become this project, was going back through American IWW newspa-